CHAPTER 19

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

E.O. APRONTI*

While good literature tends to concern itself with themes which have a universal frame of reference, it nonetheless often bears the unmistakable imprint of its area of origin, of the ethical, social, religious and ideological preoccupations of its originators. African literature is no exception to this generalization. In both its traditional and modern forms, African literature shows a concern for universal human emotions such as love, tenderness, hatred, fear and so on. But it also reveals something of the social realities and relationships of the terrain from which it draws its inspiration.

The "family" in Africa is an important social phenomenon. At its basis is a humanistic concern to find a network of assured social relationships for the individual. And in building this network, the net is cast deliberately wide to account for a variety of the problems that confront man in the course of his life - travel in remote areas, death, sudden deprivation, hunger, poverty and so on. Ties of blood relationship may be exploited to selfish ends by a few lazy individuals, but, in their positive aspect, these ties provide a ready and valuable insurance against those storms of life which are wont to overwhelm the unwary individual without notice or warning.

One of the most crucial of these relationships is the relationship of mutual obligations and expectations that persist between parents and their children in the intimate nuclear social unit in society, the family. It is the aim of this paper to explore the ways in which this social phenomenon has found expression in some areas of traditional African literature. We shall be interested as well in the ways in which the peculiarities of the African social scene are reflected in this literature as in the specifically literary mode of

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* Dr. Apronti is a Research Fellow in the Institute of African Studies, Legon.

this expression.

Traditional literature manifests itself in many forms. There are folk tales, legends, myths, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, heroic poems, praise poems, song texts, chants, incantations, epigrams, drum texts, horn texts and a variety of others. It is a mark of their relevance to their milieu, the beauty of their artistic expression and the depth of their philosophical outlook, that those forms of traditional literature that are extant have survived the test of time.

But the oral mode of transmission imposes certain constraints and conventions on this literary material. The roles of composition and performance so familiar in some written traditions tend to be conflated in the traditional setting. Since performance is essential for an oral text the company of others becomes indispensable - hence the community orientation of so much of traditional literature. In this connexion, let us consider the folk tale, by far the best known type of traditional literature.

The folk take is always told to an audience, or better still to audience-participants who often take turns at narrating the tales and also feel free to interrupt particular tales being narrated by someone else with a song, a dance or mime sequence or some other stylistic contribution. The tales are almost all fairly well-known to the audience. So interest centres primarily on the technique of narration, not on wealth of detail, though of course the latter is an aspect of the former. It is noteworthy, however, that the folk tale contains so little of the descriptive details associated with written fiction.

The essential point of the folk tale is often conveyed by the sub-liminal symbolic attributes of its characters and their actions. The symbolic frame of reference therefore counts significantly towards the meaning of a tale. But this does not stop the tale from having a social frame of reference, which is what we are presently interested in.

From this viewpoint it is important to note its frequently didactic role. The social milieu and ethical

values lie only slightly below the surface in the African setting. The possession of children is a proof of manhood in a man; it is an insurance of the perpetuation of his name. His wife or wives are therefore not only expected to have children, they are expected to have money. It is interesting to see how the social value that is given to child-birth finds expression in traditional literature and, from then on, to see what attitudes are expressed on the subject of the relationships of parents to their children and vice versa.

It is no accident that as representative a collection of traditional African literature texts as Whiteley's African Prose, Volume 1, (1964) should have more than a quarter of its stories actually beginning with a reference to child-birth or a specification of the number of children a main character has, for instance the stories of Uthlakanyana and Ukcombekcantsini[1] (op. cit pp.14 & 16).

It is our contention that these openings with this theme reflect a deep interest in the family and parent-child relationships. It is clear that the convention of the folk tale imposes particular formal properties on it. For one thing, most tales are rather brief, hence psychological depth, which would otherwise accompany the exploration of this theme, is replaced by a depth of symbolic reference and an invocation of the wider social values shared by the listeners. It is nevertheless possible to isolate some broad social values that are asserted through these tales.

Some tales reflect the idea held by certain parents that their children are part of their disposable property. The disposal is sometimes done for reasons of selfish acquisitiveness, at other times in reward for particularly brave or clever exploits performed by some one else. One such attitude is to be seen in the Kanuri story of two friends, faithfully recorded for our perusal more than a century ago in S.W. Koelle's African Native Literature (1854, reprinted in 1968, pp. 122-37). Again The Pineapple Child (Whiteley, 1964:164) is a folk tale of which the point of interest is the desire for the acquisition of children

by a childless couple. The wife is directed by an old lady - and old age is generally held to be symbolic of wisdom - to uproot one particular pineapple from a field. It is transformed into a baby girl who lives happily with them until a housemaid insults her by referring to her pineapple origins. The child flees back to her origins, much to the chagrin of the parents. (Incidentally, the Asantehene's Court Records show that a serious view was taken as late as the 1930s (and presumably even now) of anyone telling another person: "You hail from X or Y").

One of the primary obligations of parenthood is providing for one's progency. Thus the theme of inheritance figures prominently in a number of stories (e.g. Whiteley 1964. 57-8). Succession in African customary law generally depends on claims of consanguinity; whether the child concerned is born in wedlock or out of wedlock may be regarded as immaterial. One story in Whiteley turns on this point (1964.113-128). Another interesting aspect of parent-child relationships is the range of choice that parents are shown giving their children in some folk tales in their choice of spouses (e.g. Koelle op. cit pp.145-151). Some stories show parents displaying magnanimity in the discretion they allow their children (e.g. Whiteley, 1964. 174-84 & 81-84).

Since life is far from placid however it is to be expected that some tales will concern themselves with tension in family life. There is no lack of such folk tales (e.g. Whiteley op. cit. pp.85-90 & 103-5). Among the folk tales which the Ashanti use to explain social phenomena is one which folklorically accounts for the system of matrilineal succession. A poor father Kwaku Amponsa borrows some money from some one (see Peggy Appiah's Tales of an Ashanti Father. 1967: 57-60). The creditor's patience became exhausted and he decided that poor Kwaku Amponsa should come to work for him to redeem his debt.

Amponsa has a son but his wife will not allow the son to go. So the poor old man sets forth. His route passes by his sister's house; on seeing him,

she generously asks her son to take Amponsa's place. The latter willingly goes, but soon after Amponsa is able to pay back the debt and naturally, bequeaths his property to his obliging nephew.

Forms of traditional literature other than the folk-tale also deal extensively with the subject of parents and children. Consider proverbs, for instance. These are statements and questions, often cryptic in structure, with summarize the wisdom of the ages. They are universally considered to be authoritative and skill in their use is a hall-mark of oratory.

In Rattray's Ashanti Proverbs, (1916), we find the extent to which proverbial statements provide a clue to Ashanti notions of what parent-child relations ought to be. One needs to add, of course, that many of these proverbs are also to be found in the traditions of other Ghanaian communities. The links between parents and their children are considered indissoluble. Many of the proverbs quoted by Rattray emphasize the point that one's father or mother retains that relationship for ever. Thus Proverb number 488 (p.128) states that when your mother is poor, you do not leave her and go to make some one else your mother - a point reinforced on the next page by proverb number 492, which says even if your mother is not a good woman, she is your mother nonetheless. What such proverbs would seem to emphasize is the mutual and inescapable relationship of parents to children which should not be disrupted on flimsy grounds. Note the mutual nature of such obligations, a fact borne out by proverbs complimentary to the above. Hence Proverb number 343 (p.101) enjoins on mothers the duty of tender care for their children in all circumstances. It says that if your child's excrement falls on your lap, you wipe it off with dry plantain fibres, but you do not take a knife and cut the place off. The need for solicitude for children is likewise underlined by proverb number 342 (ibid) which asks whether a child ought to be breast-fed only when it is crying.

Proverb number 523 (p.140) says it is a taboo for a parent to claim that he or she is weary of having begotten a child. Indeed, adults are always expected to display superior wisdom, resilience and patience.

Their wisdom is not supposed to be questioned lightly. Thus proverb number 403 (p.112) says even the toothless old woman has tiger nuts in her bag; she must have some shrewd reason for keeping them there. A father's authority is likewise considered unquestionable: proverb number 482 (p.127) says a child is never supposed to hush up his father.

Where children pretend to be wiser than their age, elders are expected to teach them a lesson by using their wits. A child who insists on climbing a tree stump is to be allowed to do so, for soon the shortness of the stump will send him climbing down (number 369, page 105). Also, a child who fakes death deserves a mock burial (361, page 103).

The education of children is the responsibility of parents and elders. Children are admonished that if they walk behind their father they will end up by walking like their (presumably exemplary) father (493, page 129). If they learn to wash their hands well they will eat from the same dish with their elders (353, page 103). If an elder sends a child on an errand this is his prerogative; he need not scrutinize the child's face to see if he is pleased (356, p.103).

All this may sound pretty tyrannical if one did not add at once that a line of mutual expectations runs through all these precepts. The respect accorded to age is to be earned, not automatically granted. Exemplary conduct of elders is meant to include solicitude. Thus the elder who greedily eats all his food will find no child to clear his table (386, page 108). He has to take away his (empty) dishes himself. And all this is re-inforced by the positions of honour that are regularly given to those whose lives and modes of conduct are exemplary.

Perhaps the best known parent-child proverb, with which we conclude the section is the one which says no one points to his fathers' house with his left hand. The left hand is considered unclean and its use in relation to others is a taboo. This proverb enshrines the honour, respect and authority that are invested in parents in Akan and indeed all African society.

Having regard to the theme of this particular seminar, it is necessary, albeit briefly, to confirm the above by citing a few representative proverbs of the Ewe people.[2] These will serve the additional purpose of giving evidence of the extent of common ground, common world view and shared traditions that one finds among these contiguous people, the Akan and Ewe. Indeed, many of the Akan proverbs cited above are to be found in essentially the same form among many West African peoples.

The first set of Ewe proverbs stress the indissoluble link between parents and their children. One says, "A mother does not refuse or disown a child, even if the child is badly behaved". On the children's part, they are admonished that "one's wretched mother is nevertheless one's mother', which proverb is complimented by one noting that "a bad child is better than barrenness". Again, such proverbs emphasize the two-way, mutual sense of duty that binds children to their parents. While such statements may find a place in forensic oratory they are often used as well on those occasions that incline people's minds to the subject, for instance at outdooring ceremonies.

Another set of Ewe proverbs stress the solicitude and primary obligation that parents have or ought to have to their children. One says, a mother does not strike a child's stomach." Yet another, "it is one's parent who feels (pains) for one". As regards the supply of one's necessities, another proverb says "when a mother is on top of a shea tree, her child would not eat unripe fruit." What comfort for the child!

The last set of Ewe proverbs turn our attention to the prerogatives of age, prerogratives which, as we have pointed out above, are not granted automically but are rather earned through exemplary conduct. One says, "a child and a father do not argue". In this case, as in the following a certain amount of wisdom is attributed to age and it is therefore expected that older people can serve as a guide to younger ones, a point emphasized by the next proverb: "the beard (a late arrival) does not tell the eyelashes (present at birth) about the past."

Two final examples: "when your grandmother tells

you something you do not go to your mother to verify it". The final citation is a lesson to presumptuous youth: "a child does not raise his father up so that he might show him a cow".

Thus we see that the ranges and types of family relationships handled in traditional oral literature are quite varied and display a thorough fidelity to the range of parent-child relationships that we find in actual life - admiration, love, hatred tension and so on.

NOTES

1. See also the opening words of the Story of the Four Uouas (p.51); the Story of Yangara (p.56); the four Nyanza texts (beginning on pp.57, 58, and 60); the Story of Onecike (p.60); the Story of the Four Miracle Workers (p.81); the Story of Father and Son, Mother and Daughter (p.85); The Story of Chacha (p.103); the Story of the Grain the Escaped the Pestle and Mortar (p.136); two stories on page 140, the Ga version of the famous story of the Pineapple Child (p.164), and the story beginning on page 167.

2. I am grateful to my friend Eustace Egblewogbe for supplying these Ewe proverbs.

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